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ABSTRACT

A study and review of the revisions of professional writers reveals 11 functions of revision: (1) altering form, (2) organizing information, (3) creating transitions, (4) deleting information, (5) expanding information, (6) emphasizing information, (7) subordinating information, (8) creating immediacy, (9) improving syntactic structures, (10) improving language usage, and (11) cleaning up. While the revisions of professional writers are encompassed in these categories, students' revisions appear to be concentrated only in the last two categories. Most students spend their time on "surface" level revisions--changes in single words, in vocabulary and grammar. One reason students do not engage in "deeper" level revisions is the writing instruction they receive. Assignments often eliminate the need to revise in such categories as altering form and organizing information. Furthermore, many of the writing assignments imply that the audience is the teacher and the purpose is a grade. Students need to be able to write for a variety of audiences and purposes if they are to learn how to manipulate such aspects as voice and person. But changes in assignments need to be accompanied by an expansion in the repertoire of composition skills which an instructor teaches and assesses. Until all 11 categories of revision are emphasized and all other aspects of written discourse (prosody, logical thinking, and the relationship of content to structure) are taught and assessed, students will continue to concentrate only on the "lower" levels in revision. Teachers should help students approach revision with a problem orientation so they can recognize all of the functions that revisions serve. (HOD)

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THE ELEVEN FUNCTIONS OF REVISION

By
Carolyn Boiarsky

When Joe Commings, the former Atlanta Bureau Chief for Newsweek magazine, admitted that he had difficulty with transitions, I felt relieved. Transitions have been a stumbling block in my writing also. I've spent as much as an hour staring at the same two paragraphs, trying to figure out a way to tie them together effectively without using such commonplace connectives as "therefore," "then," and "also." But I have always felt that my problem was evidence of my own incompetence; I hadn't realized that it was a common one among writers.

Joe and I, both professional writers, had been unaware that the amount and kinds of work in which we engaged in revising our writing was representative of that done by most writers and not an eccentric trait, indicative of our own ineffectiveness. No wonder so many teachers are often even less aware of what occurs during the revision process. Yet, without fully understanding the process, teachers are constrained from helping students revise their writing as effectively as they might. For this reason I decided to study what professional writers try to do when they revise. I wanted to determine what specific changes a writer makes to turn the incoherent babbling of a first draft into a logically organized, syntactically mature and imaginative piece. To discover this process, I decided to investigate the specific functions a writer's revisions serve within the context of a piece of writing.

Previous studies in revision have concentrated on the syntactic units involved (Bridwell, 1980; Commers, 1980). However, these units did not appear appropriate for my study of the functions of revision. These units are simply the pieces which the writer manipulates to communicate an idea; they are analagous to the pieces on a chessboard which a player manipulates to win a game. Revisions are made in terms of the whole idea rather than the syntactic elements comprising it, just as the chess pieces are moved in terms of a broad strategy rather than because of their individual properties. The purpose of revision is not to change a syntactic unit, whether it is the word or the paragraph, but rather to clarify an idea.

A second problem with using syntactic units as criteria for studying revision is that the same syntactic unit can serve several functions. For example, a sentence can be deleted because it repeats information already presented in a previous sentence and is, therefore, unnecessary, or it can be deleted because it belongs in a different paragraph or because it should have been combined with another sentence in a subordinated form, such as a phrase. Thus, a single syntactic unit, the sentence, can be deleted for three different purposes: (1) to delete information, (2) to reorganize information and (3) to subordinate an idea.

I decided, therefore, to use a deductive approach - to determine what was happening to the piece of writing as it was being revised and, then, if possible, to derive categories from these observations. Sommers identified four such categories - addition, deletion, substitution and reordering - which she correlated with syntactic units in her study. However, these appeared to be limited and insufficient to cover such problems as inappropriate voice or inability to relate various concepts. These problems are likely to

require complex changes involving style and angle respectively. In addition, Sommers' four categories appear to be more concerned with how the writer makes a change - by adding, deleting, substituting or reordering - than with why the writer makes a change.

I selected for study a 1,500 word article in the conative transactional mode (Britton, 1979). I had written the article only a month ago and all of the drafts, from the first to the final published version, still existed. Since the article had been written recently, I could remember fairly well the reasons for the various changes. In addition, I felt that because the article was a piece of expository discourse, it was representative of the kind of writing expected in freshmen composition. I reviewed every revision on each draft to determine (1) the function which the revision served, i.e. to reorganize information, to clean up, and (2) the specific change made, i.e. a word crossed out, a paragraph moved. I then attempted to categorize the functions. They appeared to fall into eleven categories:

(1) altering form
(2) organizing information
(3) creating transitions
(4) deleting information
(5) expanding information
(6) emphasizing information
(7) subordinating information
(8) creating immediacy
(9) improving syntactic structures
(10) improving language usage
(11) cleaning up

See figure 1.

To determine whether or not these categories were applicable to other pieces of writing, I examined drafts from a variety of other works which I had written during the past year. These included such diverse forms as instructional material, business letters, a research proposal, and several

magazine articles. Not every piece required revisions in each of the eleven categories, i.e. the research proposal did not require revision under altering form, but all revisions appeared to fit into the eleven categories. Also, each category was represented by a revision in at least one of the pieces studied beyond the original article.

It was also necessary to determine whether these categories would be relevant for other writers and I studied the drafts of several other writers* and then discussed their revisions with them. Their writing included works in the poetic as well as the transactional mode. These drafts and my discussions with the authors concerning their revisions indicated that the revisions in which they engaged encompassed the eleven categories. Though there were differences concerning those areas the writers considered to be of the most concern and taking the most time, the authors suggested no additions or deletions to the eleven categories.

These categories are not linear but recursive as Murray suggests (1968). The writer moves in and out of them, a change in organization often signalling a need for a transition which in turn may create a need to subordinate an idea which triggers a change in syntactic structures, not only in the particular sentence effected, but in the following one also. In addition, there is no specific time during the writing process when each of the various revisions occur. Some are made as early as the prewriting stage (Murray, 1978), while others occur during in-process drafting and still others between drafts (Flower, 1977). Nor can these categories be ranked according to their importance,

*Joe Cummings; Katie Baer, Editor of the Hospital Infection Control Newsletter; Juliet Zimmerman, Medical writer for Booz-Allen and Hamilton; George Chambers, poet, "The Bonnyclabber," and novelist, Null Set and Other Stories.

since each is necessary for a piece of writing to be effective. A piece, which is mechanically perfect but doesn't work because the tone is inappropriate, is as much a failure as a piece which works but which is rendered confusing or choppy by inaccurate grammar or punctuation.

It is important that these eleven categories of revision functions should not be considered prescriptive. They are not rubrics for how a writer should revise. Rather they are descriptive, describing the functions which certain revisions serve in solving problems and strengthening aspects inherent in a piece of written discourse. The writer must analyze his/her writing and then determine from among alternatives what must be done to solve the existing problems and to strengthen the work. It is within this context of a problem solving approach that a hierarchy among the categories exists. A writer needs to solve the problem of making a piece work, before he/she attempts to solve a problem of poor transitions. Because the solution for a piece, which doesn't work, is often to alter some aspect associated with the piece's form, revisions within the category of altering form take precedence over revisions serving other functions.

Though the eleven categories describe solutions to problems within a piece of writing, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between a problem and a specific solution. A writer may diagnose the problem in his/her work as a lack of coherence. However he/she must then determine in which of several alternative solutions to engage to create a coherent piece. The solution may be as complicated as creating an entirely new angle around which to develop the piece or as simple as creating transitions to hold the major sections of the piece together.

While the revisions of professional writers are encompassed in those eleven categories, students' revisions, in the main, appear to be concentrated only in the last two categories. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (1977), Sommers and Bridwell found that students spend most of their time on "surface" level revisions - changes in single words, in vocabulary and grammar - and they engage in most of these during in-process drafting. The "deeper" levels, which involve changes in large syntactic units, including paragraphs and the entire theme, and which are often done between drafts, are seldom considered by the majority of students. Yet, when they are considered and carried out between drafts, there is a positive correlation with their ratings, according to Bridwell.

Though Bridwell is concerned with the syntactic units being revised rather than with the functions, there appears to be a direct correlation between the two. Two of the functions, improving language usage and cleaning up, require changes mainly in a single word, the lowest syntactic level, and a third category, improving syntactic structures, is limited to the sentence. All of the other functions, which involve "deeper" levels, often require changes in the larger units, which range from a paragraph to an entire section composed of several thousand words and numerous paragraphs.

Sommers suggests that students spend time on the small syntactic units because they see words as the units of written discourse. I suggest, however, that the reason students rely mainly on the small units, which fall largely into the three surface level categories, is the writing instruction. The assignments themselves often eliminate the need to revise in such categories as altering form and organizing information. In addition, teachers have spent little time, either in their teaching or in their assessment of writing proficiency, considering aspects of these other categories, which often require the manipulation of the larger syntactic units.

Many of the assignments in both secondary English classes, especially those concerned with college preparation, and freshman composition courses imply that the audience is the teacher and the purpose is a grade. Thus, the students are seldom faced with the problem of revising their papers in terms of altering form because according to their perceptions, the audience and/or purpose seldom changes. In these situations, students often try to "psyche out" the style, including the tone, format, point of view, which they believe the instructor wants and then use it for most of their assignments. Students need to be able to write for a variety of audiences and purposes if they are to learn how to manipulate such aspects as voice and person. Assignments, especially at the secondary school level, which are written in relation to some of the older textbooks, also usually imply the use of the five paragraph theme format. By adapting this single organizational format for much of their expository discourse, students avoid the possibility of writing a disorganized piece which would require them to reorganize the material during revisions. Students need to be made aware of the variety of organizational structures which professional writers use and encouraged to experiment with various formats if they are to learn to select from among them the one which best presents the content for a particular piece (Boiarsky, 1982). (See sample for assignments which necessitate revision.)

But changes in assignments need to be accompanied by an expansion in the repertoire of composition skills which an instructor teaches and assesses. Traditionally, instructors have emphasized the areas of vocabulary and mechanics, both in their teaching and in their assessment of writing, and have spent comparatively little time, if any, on the other categories (Sommers, 1981). Beginning with the primary grades and continuing through college composition courses,

students are taught punctuation, usage, vocabulary and spelling, and it is in these areas that they are often required to "revise" in terms of "correct." Until all eleven of the categories are emphasized, until all other aspects of written discourse, such as prosody, logical thinking, and the relationship of content to structure, are taught and assessed, students will continue to concentrate only on the "lower" levels.

By becoming aware of the other, larger areas involved in revision, students can begin to resolve their writing problems satisfactorily. Sommers (1980) contends that "students sense something larger than moving words around needs to be done to fix their writing," but they don't know what it is. What it is can be found in those other categories. And once students recognize that their problems lie beyond punctuation and language usage, they can begin to develop a set of strategies for solving them. Flanigan (1980) suggests a set of strategies and Donald Graves (1979) found that, when students approach revision with a problem orientation, they will engage in major revision activities.

The need to approach writing with a problem orientation is the key to helping students engage in major revision activities. We, as teachers, need to regard students' drafts with a problem orientation, rather than with what Sommers calls a "rigid rule" approach. We need to look at the draft to discover what is wrong with it, rather than what rules have been broken, and then we need to help the student resolve the problem. If we are to do this successfully, we will have to look beyond errors in language usage, vocabulary and the mechanics. We will have to consider such areas as syntactic rhythm, immediacy and emphasis. We will have to determine what functions students' revision must serve if they are to resolve the problems in their various pieces of discourse.

To provide students with this type of help effectively, we will need to change the content of our feedback to students during conferences and on their papers. We will need to take the time to analyze a piece, to determine what the student is trying to say, if he/she has said it and, if not, why not. To do this, our responses must be text specific. We must talk in terms of the specific relationship which exists between the content and style and the projected audience and purpose of the piece.

We need to provide students with the kinds of assignments, which both necessitate and motivate them to engage in major revision activities. And we need to help them approach revision with a problem orientation and to provide them with relevant feedback for helping them solve their problems. If we can meet these needs, then our students will begin to recognize all of the functions which revisions serve and they will begin to make effective revisions to improve their written discourse.

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Sample Assignments

1. The following assignments should be made consecutively. They require the students to write (1) for different audiences, i.e. for their peers for assignment "a" and for an adult lay audience for assignment "b" (2) for different purposes, i.e. to persuade in assignment "a," and inform in assignment "b," and (3) in different modes, i.e. in the persuasive mode in assignment "a" and in the expository mode in assignment "b."

a. Write an editorial for the student newspaper arguing for or against President Reagan's proposed cuts in student loans.

b. Write a feature article for the Sunday magazine of the local newspaper discussing the pros and cons of President Reagan's proposed cuts in student loans.

2. The following assignments should be made consecutively during the same class period. They will require students to adapt different points of view which in turn may require students to use different voices and different organizational formats.

a. Write the introductory paragraph for an analysis of the (article, book, TV show, movie) you have just (read, seen). Then make an informal outline of the remainder of your analysis.

b. Write a different introductory paragraph for the same article, etc., but one which views the article, etc. from a different angle. Then make an informal outline of the remainder of your analysis.

c. Write a third introductory paragraph for the same article, etc., again, using an angle which differs from the other two and make a third informal outline of the remainder of the analysis.

d. Select two of the three to complete for the following week.

Both of these assignments should be followed by discussion periods to discuss how the different treatments of the same subject required different points of view, modes, voices, and organizational formats.

Figure 1

The Functions of Revision

1. Altering form--Changing tone, voice, point of view, person, style.

2. Organizing Information--Reorganizing ideas, sections, paragraphs, sentences, words.

3. Creating Transitions--Connecting ideas, sections, paragraphs, sentences, words.

4. Deleting Information--Removing ideas, arguments, descriptions, sections, paragraphs, sentences, words.

5. Expanding Information--Adding ideas, arguments, descriptions, sections, paragraphs, sentences, words.

6. Emphasizing Ideas--Reorganizing sections, paragraphs, sentences, words; changing syntactic structures.

7. Subordinating Ideas-- Reorganizing sections, paragraphs, sentences; changing syntactic structures.

8. Creating Immediacy--Using direct quotes, first or second person, participles; changing tense, voice; expanding description.

9. Improving syntactic structures--Changing sentence, clause and phrase patterns; changing prosodic patterns.

10. Improving language usage--Changing words, metaphors, similes, parallel construction, other rhetorical devices.

11. Cleaning Up--Correcting grammar, punctuation, capitalization, word usage, spelling, graphic representation.

This is only a partial list of the types of changes which can serve each function. Other syntactical and rhetorical alterations can be made within each category.

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